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Is Masculinity Always Privileged?: A Transman's Experience with Intimate Partner Violence

by Mauro Sifuentes

I am a queer and trans non-profit professional of color (mixed-race) who works at an organization in the Bay Area of California that focuses on crisis intervention services for domestic violence survivors. My skills are best put to use doing prevention work; I spend a lot of time working with youth in public schools and other settings to have conversations about interpersonal and community violence, and I also do my best to open up space in collaborative agency meetings to discuss the particular issues that queer and trans youth and adults face. All of this work is important to me today because of the ways that domestic/intimate partner violence (IPV) has affected my own life.

Before getting into my own story, I would like to provide a bit of context for queer cultural and political spaces in the Bay Area. Many are putting a lot of effort into rethinking relationships to privilege and accountability, which is quite possibly one of the most difficult tasks a community can take on, especially during an era of 'post-'racism that also continues to ignore myriad institutionalized -isms that hugely affect people's lives and their ability to thrive, including but not limited to ableism, immigration issues, transphobia/cissexism, homophobia/heterosexism, among others. A mantra I have seen many queer people take up, especially many masculine-of-center queer people, is that "Masculinity is privileged/femininity is denigrated," in attempts to address institutionalized sexism.

I think that as a starting point, this can be an important realization for many who have not questioned structures of sexism and binary gender, as well as performances of gender. Being mindful of how our language, bodies, and mannerisms take up space in various settings is crucial in our efforts to support others in using their voices to speak on a variety of

issues that have been silenced, both historically and in present organizing efforts. I also believe that drawing binaries like this out of context can also be very dangerous. Many progressive queer people are looking for scripts so that they can be good allies; these scripts often rely on reductive thinking that marginalizes other people still, but this marginalization is now grounded in a sense of political progressiveness and moral righteousness, making it even more difficult for the margins-of-the-margins to voice their experiences and concerns.

To illustrate the problematics of relying too heavily on the trope that “Masculinity is privileged/feminity is denigrated,” in all moments, I want to share my own story in order to continue a conversation that feels as though it is just beginning. Though I understand that trigger warnings can be helpful tools in order to let others know when content might be very difficult, if not harmful, I often experience their insertion as jilting and heavy-handed. I’m a queer, trans person of mixed-race experience who has survived physical, verbal, and emotional violence, not only from intimate partners, but from strangers as well. I don’t want to sanitize my story with too many warnings. It is simple enough to say that the re-telling of these events might be most traumatic for me, and it is my hope that these words might be held carefully in a community invested in thinking about all forms of violence experienced by its members, difficult as that task may be.

I was in a relationship with a queer, self-identified femme woman. During the course of our relationship, there were many warning signs that I chose to ignore or push back against. Verbal mistreatment via name-calling and other insults. My hormonal transition began during this relationship – before I knew it, my body had become a battleground and a perceived betrayal. What I had not realized is that this self-proclaimed feminist partner of mine had chosen to hide from her own intense experiences of sexism by choosing queer partners, seeking solace from interactions with men in pursuit of her belief that sexism ended where her relationships with men did. What we often fail to see is that the internalized sexism we learn, as both women and trans people, comes with us wherever we go and we have the imperative to work through it in ways that don’t perpetuate cycles of violence. As my body began to change as a result of testosterone injections, I became the target of her rage. My body was beginning to scare her, in appearance and strength. As

I was gaining confidence, I was able to stand up for myself in arguments in ways I had not before, which was written off as me aspiring to oppressive male privilege, ignoring that my identification with “male” was minimal and fraught. Frustrations mounted and her attacks shifted from verbal to psychological to physical, overlapping and reinforcing one another. Through this all, I refused physical retaliation.

The vulnerabilities I had expressed before I chose to transition and those I experienced early on were used against me in unfathomable ways. I was told that as a genderqueer-presenting person, I was more attractive as a partner, and that she had “the best of both worlds,” but now that I was more male-presenting, she was “doubly screwed” because she 1) could not push back against me like she would a cisgender male partner and 2) she had to take my experiences as a trans person seriously, and she did not want to have to do that. Another variable in this dynamic was race; my former partner was a white, feminist, queer, femme woman. When the physical violence and psychological abuse became too much for me to handle, I sought help from friends we shared as a couple. These friends were also a couple – a couple of color, composed of a queer woman and a mostly-straight man.

I now know that how they responded to my pleas for help are couched in reductive thinking about gender and race. These friends did not believe me, which fed into a pre-existing narrative that male or masculine people cannot be victims/survivors of IPV, a trope that proliferates in the professional literature on and responses to IPV. Additionally, within social categories, white women are often viewed as the least violent, where as men or masculine people of color are readily assumed to be the perpetrators of violence, especially violence against white women. My status as a queer and trans person did not come into the equation. These friends, rather than keeping my confidence, threatened to tell my partner that I was reaching out for help, putting me once again in harm's way, as I feared retaliation for breaking my own isolation.

It brings me an immense sense of gratitude that I was able to reach out to other people outside of my immediate circle, acquaintances who came to my aid and helped me feel empowered to make the choices that I needed to keep myself safe, physically and psychologically. I also know that because of the particularities of my circumstances, I was very lucky to

receive that support. Many male or masculine-presenting queer people and people of color rarely seek out or receive resources and support when experiencing IPV. A dominant narrative that only women and feminine-presenting people can experience this form of violence has seeped into queer and trans spaces as well; most organizations are not trained or set up to respond to these groups of people.

Here I return to my initial statement about refusing the trope of “Masculinity is privileged/Femininity is denigrated” - this understanding of gender dangerously invisibilizes the struggle of many trans masculine people, especially people of color. The ways that trans feminine people experience violence and discrimination can often look very different than the way trans masculine people experience discrimination. I also must admit the messiness of the categories, and that not all people who identify as a trans woman/MTF experience themselves as feminine, just as not all people who identify as a trans man/FTM experience themselves as masculine. Though this topic warrants its own in-depth analysis, I will say here that our cultural fixation on policing the gender of those who are male or are deemed as 'supposed' to be male (trans women) is so intense and violent, and this fixation also allows for increased political visibility, media attention, and support for academic inquiry. People who are on a trans masculine spectrum are largely missing from the public eye, especially trans masculine people of color. We need to cultivate much richer horizontal alliances across trans communities, where those who do not experience violent targeting speak up on behalf of those who do, just as those who receive more attention can also be sure to bring up the concerns of those community members who are less visible. These alliances must cross both lines of gender, as well as race.

It is also my hope that non-trans queers can support these relationships within trans communities without imposing binaries and hierarchies on our experiences. We all need support in thinking through the complexity of our realities, and telling marginalized communities to be silent simply because they are masculine-presenting is immensely harmful, as well as violently reductive. The ways that I have experienced myself as a masculine trans person is incredibly different from other presentations of masculinity. How I have struggled to be entitled to my gender presentation warrants thoughtful reflection instead of knee-jerk criticism. I acknowledge the ways that I move through the world in certain

moments with increased ease, as my own feminist imperative; I also know that I am a short transgender man of color with no interest in engaging in certain politics of masculinity. In many contexts, masculinity is not the only vector of analysis that can account for how I will be privileged or not.

I want to thank people for reading, and to give my apologies for not writing about this topic in a way that is more beautiful or literary. It has taken me three years to find even these meager words and I've avoided recounting my experience in a more public forum precisely because of the way words feel inadequate and lifeless when discussing my experiences of violence. Coping looks catatonic in this moment, but is hopefully not entirely in vain. Perhaps avoiding more robust language is a retreat from expectation, a distancing of myself from the need to make an experience presentable or palatable by turning it into something beautiful. I am committed to continuing this conversation as a community member as well as a scholar – currently, I'm pursuing academic research into the ways that transgender people have been represented across time in scientific and social research in order to better understand both the current predicament we often find ourselves in, as well as the ways binary gender often goes unquestioned even through confrontations with people who defy easy categorization.

I bring forward this conversation in hopes that it can continue and to provide a framework for addressing these issues (sexism, racism, alliance, hierarchies, legitimacy, IPV, queerness, etc.) with a little more thoughtfulness and compassion, and to practice a refusal of easy directions and analysis when it comes to building alliances across difference. There are many queer communities of color grappling with these important questions of how to be in relation to one another and support one another, and I can only hope that this adds something useful to those discussions.

For questions/comments, please email me at chicomorenontumblr@gmail.com

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